

Ten Questions Answered on Laughter Yoga and Mental Health by Dr. Madan Kataria

Dr. Kataria was interviewed by Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, Department of Psychology, University of Bolton, BL3 5AB Bolton, UK. She posed ten questions related to mental health to Dr. Madan Kataria, the founder of the Laughter Yoga Movement worldwide.

What Do You See as the Key Benefits of Laughter for Mental Health?

Laughter has the ability to change our mood within minutes by releasing happy hormones like endorphins, which make you feel good. Mood has the greatest impact on mental health. The number one illness in the world is depression, with 300 million people suffering worldwide. Depressed people rarely laugh. If you keep laughing, you are less likely to become depressed. The twin sister of depression is anxiety, which is also a big problem globally. Sometimes depression and anxiety appear together, and other times they do not. As a physician, I know that there are many side effects from tranquilizers and anti-anxiety medications. There is also obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Patients with anxiety tend to breathe very shallowly, yet

laughter is all about deep belly breathing, using your diaphragm and abs, which helps people suffering from anxiety.

Health is all about your immune system and oxygenation. If your body has enough oxygen, it will heal much faster and strengthen its immunity. I have been laughing non-stop for 27 years, and I have never suffered from colds or coughs. I even contracted COVID-19 but recovered in one day.

We need to use laughter to free ourselves from the negativity stored in our subconscious mind. Catharsis is one way to release this, and unconditional laughter is the best catharsis. You cannot achieve this with jokes.

How Does Laughter Impact Our Brain Chemistry?

All the major chemicals we call "happy hormones" dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins are released as a result of laughter. These are the main chemicals that help change mood states.

Do You See Laughter as Having Similar Benefits to Exercise?

Yes, absolutely. Laughter increases your heart rate and heart rate variability. A study by Law et al. (2018) from Auckland University, New Zealand, found that heart rate variability increases with laughter, similar to any other aerobic exercise. This is very important for seniors who do not exercise much. They often lack motivation, and if they do not exercise, they may become ill. A study from Georgia, Atlanta, by Celeste Greene et al. (2017), found significant improvements in mental health, self-efficacy for exercise, and aerobic endurance following simulated laughter exercises. Including laughter exercises in between physical exercises can motivate them to do more. In Hong Kong senior centers, we found that combining laughter and physical exercise was effective. Another study (Wagner et al., 2014) from Germany explored laughter's impact on abdominal muscles with favorable results.

In Laughter Yoga sessions, we incorporate different exercises like stretching, joint movements, and clapping to stimulate acupressure points, along with dancing and laughing to further enhance the cardiovascular effect.

Do You Have Any Thoughts on the Differences Between Laughing With and Laughing Without Humor?

There are two models of laughter. One is the humor model, which originates from the mind. When you find something funny or amusing, you start laughing—this is mind-body laughter. In Laughter Yoga, we understand that not everyone has a great sense of humor, and they may not laugh because they do not find enough jokes amusing. Laughter Yoga is a model where laughter originates in the body first, and the mind follows.

Who are the best laughers in the world? Children. They do not use humor to laugh; they play and laugh physically. We teach people how to laugh and play like children. In Laughter Yoga, laughter is an outcome of play. When you start laughing as an exercise, your mind opens up, and you lose your inhibitions and shyness, allowing you to see the humor in things. Laughter and humor run in a circle with a cause-and-effect relationship. In Laughter Yoga, laughter is the cause, and humor is the effect, allowing you to develop your sense of humor through laughter.

What Are Your Thoughts on Prescribing Laughter for Health and Well-being?

From the beginning, my intention was that laughter should be prescribed and practiced by everyone. For centuries, people have known that laughter is the best medicine, and science has proven it. However, there was no reliable delivery system available for people. Laughter Yoga provides a prescription for obtaining health benefits daily. Laughter through clowning or humor is good, but it is not reliable, nor does it guarantee how much people will laugh. To get health benefits, one needs 10–15 minutes of sustained laughter, which humor alone cannot provide because it is intermittent. This is why Laughter Yoga is ideal.

I also like the idea of the Laughing 1-minute laughter prescription, as it provides another method to ensure a guaranteed dose of laughter. However, while 1 minute is a good introduction to intentional laughter, I do not think it is enough. In summary, laughter should be prescribed and can be practiced by anyone.

How Can Social Laughter Be Encouraged in People Who Feel Anxious About Social Situations?

It is much easier to laugh in groups than individually. Depressed people are less likely to laugh from watching comedy or jokes. However, they are more likely to physically laugh when with others. Robert Provine noted in his book *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* that people laugh 30 times more often in company. Our mission in Laughter Yoga is to create laughter communities, making laughter easier and more connected—face to face. We are the real Facebook of the world!

Laughing with strangers can feel vulnerable, but Laughter Yogis are very welcoming. It's not just about laughter but about connecting with people. When people join a Laughter Club, they are warmly welcomed, and their anxiety disappears because we are not challenging them. We simply encourage them to try as much as they can, and gradually they lose their inhibitions. Between laughs, there are breathing exercises, which are essential for overcoming social anxiety. We have four steps: clapping, warming up, breathing, and chanting, “We are very good, very good. Yay!” So, it is not difficult for people with social anxiety.

Is Laughing Alone, or Solitary Laughter, Important and Why?

The core philosophy of Laughter Yoga is laughing for no reason. However, it is much easier to laugh in a group because contagious laughter is generated through eye contact and playfulness. After practicing laughter in a group a few times, your mind becomes conditioned to laugh for no reason. Once you have learned this from being with a Laughter Club, you can then practice laughter exercises alone.

I start my day at 4 a.m. with laughter. I wasn't always like this, but through teaching Laughter Yoga, it became part of my routine. Now, I can laugh at almost anything. This is called the "art of laughing"—learning to laugh for no reason so that you can practice anywhere, anytime. You don't need to depend on others or even a Laughter Club. Laughing every day is crucial if you want to stay healthy and happy. That's what I teach all my students: laugh with the group once a week (either online or in person), but laugh daily by yourself.

Do You See Laughter and Humor as a Way to Personal Development and Self-Help, and How?

Laughing, especially for no reason, helps you break out of your comfort zone. Learning to laugh intentionally is challenging but helps to overcome shyness and inhibitions. Once you break those barriers, your perception expands, and you begin to see the world in a new light. In Laughter Yoga, we describe this feeling as joy.

Joy differs from happiness. Happiness is based on external factors, such as how life has been over the years. It relates to past experiences. Present-moment happiness is called joy. Joy is the unconditional commitment to being happy in the present moment, regardless of circumstances. You can still say, “ho ho, ha ha ha, very good, very good – yay!” Joy can be created on demand and involves four elements: singing, dancing, playing, and laughing. This is what we teach in Laughter Yoga.

Developing your emotional coping skills is important because, as we grow, laughter shifts from the body to the mind and becomes intellectual. This often creates more problems in life. My advice is:

- If you want to be happy, act like a happy person. Acting happy is the easiest and cheapest way to be happy.
- Be around happy people. We are a product of our environment, and the people we live with influence us.
- If you want to be happy, give happiness to others. If you're happy, but those around you aren't, they will make it difficult for you to stay happy. So, keep spreading happiness.

How Can People Struggling Deeply with Illness and Depression Be Motivated to Laugh?

Firstly, it's important to understand laughter and its scientifically proven benefits. When people understand the advantages, this is the first step toward motivation. Secondly, they need to practice laughter, as knowledge alone is not enough to gain its benefits. That's where Laughter Yoga comes in.

How do you get people to join a Laughter Club? We believe that learning by experience is more powerful than just acquiring knowledge. A Laughter Club is a community where laughter is the activity. When people see others participating, it motivates them to

join. We encourage people to experience it at least once. In 99% of cases, people get hooked and start laughing in Laughter Yoga groups. We advise people not to judge others laughing for no reason—it may seem odd at first. But experiencing group laughter is much easier than it seems. For people to fully benefit, we sometimes encourage longer laughter sessions—one to two weeks of laughing for 3 hours a day. This technique, influenced by Osho, combines laughter with silence and even crying for a more profound cathartic experience.

What Are the Next Steps for the Scientific Investigation of Laughter?

Laughter Yoga became popular long before scientific studies were conducted on it. In India, people trust the experience itself. However, in the West, people are more logical and analytical. Over 300 research papers on Laughter Yoga have been published worldwide, and it would be beneficial to summarize these findings. Perhaps we need to select key studies and present them as proof. Scientific studies can help motivate more people to engage in Laughter Yoga.

We already have hundreds of studies, and we all know the physical, social, and emotional health benefits of laughter.